



## 2006 Census: Census through the ages

### IN ANCIENT TIMES

The first known census was taken by the Babylonians in 3800 BC, nearly 6000 years ago. Records suggest that it was taken every six or seven years and counted the number of people, livestock, quantities of butter, honey, milk, wool and vegetables.

In 2500 BC, Egypt conducted a census to assess the labour force available for building pyramids. In about 1490 BC, Israel carried out a Census to count people liable for military service and taxation. From a very early period, China placed great importance on conducting the Census. In 550 BC, Confucius compiled a book known as the 'Shu King'. This book dealt with not only the enumeration of Chinese people, but also contained agricultural, industrial, commercial and other statistics dating back to the time of Emperor Yu, who reigned from around 3000 BC.

The word 'census' has its origins in ancient Rome, coming from the Latin word 'censere', meaning estimate. The Roman census was the most developed of any recorded in the ancient world and it played a crucial role in the administration of the Roman Empire. The Roman Census was carried out every five years. It provided a register of citizens and their property from which their duties and privileges could be listed.

### THE MODERN CENSUS

The first modern record of a census of population was in Quebec, Canada (known at the time as La Nouvelle France). Fifteen censuses were conducted in Quebec between the years of 1665 and 1754. In

Europe, registration of local citizenship began in Wurtemberg in 1622, but systematic records of population do not appear to have started until the 18th century. In 1719, Frederick William I of Prussia, commenced half yearly counts of the population, recording where people lived and their financial details. In the USA, the first census was taken in 1790. Both England and France began conducting regular censuses in 1801, while in Norway, censuses began in 1815.

## **EARLY CENSUSES IN AUSTRALIA**

The first population counts in Australia were known as 'musters', the first being taken at Sydney Cove in 1788. The main purpose of these musters was to estimate the quantities of food and other supplies that were required to support the new colony. Musters tended to concentrate only on parts of the total population – convicts, free settlers or landowners – and only within certain areas of the colony. In 1828, a Census was taken in NSW. The Census was conducted to show the number of people by gender and age in the various localities within the colony.

In the following years, the other Australian colonies (Victoria, Van Dieman's Land [now Tasmania], South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland) all initiated their own censuses. The 1881 Census of the British Empire was the first attempt to count the total population of Australia (as well as the rest of the British Empire, later to become known as the British Commonwealth) on the same day. The operation was based on the methods used in England and Wales, where collectors were sent to the furthest corners of Australia to collect information on every inhabitant.

## **CENSUSES AFTER FEDERATION**

The Federation of Australia in 1901 provided the driving force needed to fully coordinate the Census on a nation-wide basis. The newly

established constitution gave federal parliament the power "to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to [among other things] Census and Statistics". On 8 December 1905 the Commonwealth Government exercised its constitutional power and enacted the [Census and Statistics Act \(1905\)](#) providing that "the Census shall be taken in the year 1911, and in every tenth year thereafter". Later the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics was formed (renamed the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1975).

The first nationally coordinated Census of Australia was taken on the night of 2 April 1911. The 1911 Census Form contained fourteen questions related to each individual and a further seven questions related to the individual's dwellings. Many of the questions from the 1911 Census Form – such as age, marital status and religion – are still asked today. The first nation-wide Census revealed that the population of Australia in 1911 was 4,455,005.

Further Censuses were held in 1921 and 1933, but the scheduled Census for 1941 was postponed due to the Australia's involvement in the Second World War. The first post-war Census was taken in 1947 after an interval of 14 years. It played an important role in redirecting Australia's attention in the aftermath of the war. Previous censuses had concentrated on basic aspects such as materials used in building houses. However, with advances in technology, Census questions began to focus on the facilities contained within a house such as whether houses were supplied with gas, electricity and water as well as toilet, washing and cooking facilities.

Since the 1961 Census, Australia has taken a Census every five years. The 1971 Referendum saw the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the count which was the first time they were incorporated into the official population enumeration.

The 2001 Census Form included questions about people's use of computers, their ancestry and whether they wished to participate in the Centenary of Federation Time Capsule project to commemorate one hundred years of Federation. Australians were given the option of having name-identified information retained and kept secure at the National

Archives of Australia. This information will be made public after 99 years as a significant contribution to preserving Australia's history for future generations.

This option is again available for the 2006 Census.

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